A Response to UT Provost William Inboden's

"Restoring the Academic Social Contract"

Here are some talking points in response to University of Texas Provost William Inboden's vision for higher education as articulated in his essay, "Restoring the Academic Social Contract," National Affairs, Number 65, Fall 2025. Quotations in italics are from Inboden's essay.

The full essay is available online at:

www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/restoring-academic-social-contract

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Restoring Public Trust

> *Higher education in America sits at a paradox: American universities are simultaneously the crown jewel of the American education system and are also enduring their worst crisis in over a century. ... Most fundamentally, the crisis is one of legitimacy and trust.*

This so-called problem of loss of "public trust" is one of Inboden's favorite talking points. If there is a crisis (and not just one declared by this rhetoric), one place to look would be the defunding of the public university going back to the 1980s. Moreover, given that UT is highly ranked and has increasingly selective admissions (now the top 6% of Texas high school students), we don't seem to be experiencing a loss of public trust. The real loss of trust seems to be the UT administration's unwillingness to trust its own faculty and students.

What is the Mission of Higher Education? Civic Leadership, Social Justice, and Public Citizens

> Inboden deplores the loss of *"an education that helped form students into honorable, productive citizens equipped to carry out the duties of self-government in our constitutional republic."*

What Inboden calls "civic leadership" is what many of us would call education for social justice. The value of the university in forming public citizens is something that many of us have been doing for years through programs in the humanities, in public-facing scholarship, in community engagement.

Hurt Feelings

> *Two anecdotes from my first year in graduate school in 1998 now loom large in my mind as harbingers of academia's troubled trajectory.*
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> *I had pursued graduate school to get away from politics; he had pursued it to advance his political activism.*

Inboden bases his argument in anecdotes about experiences he had as a graduate student almost 40 years ago. He seems not to know anything about the work that we do in 2025 and how we address diverse perspectives in the classroom. It is very common for many students to feel like they are the "only one" of a certain identity in the room, and it's often important for them to stick around long enough to discover that others probably feel the same way too. Our strategies for addressing feelings in the classroom, one of my areas of expertise, are many – as we labor to teach students to tolerate the discomfort that comes from learning in a diverse classroom. I'm sorry that Inboden had those experiences – but using them as the basis for an entire national policy is a very weak foundation – especially since it seems like he has gone on to a very illustrious career.

Monocultures of Liberalism: Republicans and Democrats

> *Suffice to say there are many humanities and social-science departments that do not have a single Republican on their faculties, and among social-science professors nationwide, there are more Marxists than conservatives. The only thing more remarkable than that ideological imbalance is how unremarkable most universities have regarded it — at least if judged by how little most university leaders (including deans, provosts, presidents, and governing boards) have done to address it over that time span.*

There also seems to be a consistent focus on ratios of Democrats to Republicans as a measure of diversity. But, in fact, within that supposed "monoculture" of Democrats, there is a vast range of differences, as evidenced by recent conflicts over anti-racism, anti-semitism, trans rights and more. Most of us who are being seen as the problem that is ruining academia are actually in a very tiny, and severely, embattled minority.

Identity Politics and Politics in the Academy

> *The identity-studies framework is not without insight. Race and gender are important parts of who we are and how we interact with each other (and yes, how we sometimes oppress each other). Academic freedom protects such scholarship, and a genuinely pluralist academia will include scholars who focus on such areas as part of a faculty with a broad and diverse range of views. Yet when such schools of thought, often accompanied by partisan activism, exert an intolerant hegemony that captures entire departments or even fields, it suffocates meaningful academic inquiry. It also imperils the academic freedom of scholars who dissent from the department line.*

Inboden's critique of identity politics – and the presence of politics in the university – are arguments that circulate over and over again as a way of demeaning what many of us do. And I don't recognize what we do in his characterization of it as indoctrination or one-sided teaching and scholarship. Moreover, his own focus on civic leadership and the relation between the university and public life would seem to contradict his argument for their separation.

The 1619 Project and the Declaration of Independence: A Return to the Classics

> *As a result, too many American history courses present the American past as a litany of oppressions and hypocrisies, leaving students with an imbalanced view of the United States. A few years ago, I taught a seminar on international relations to master's degree students. During a class session on how the American War of Independence caused a geopolitical shock to the 18th-century era of empire, I quoted in passing a few lines from the Declaration of Independence. These words were greeted by blank stares among the 25 or so students in the class. I paused and asked how many of the students had ever before read the Declaration of Independence. Only two hands went up. I then asked how many of the students had ever read anything from the 1619 Project. Virtually every hand went up.*

It's interesting to see Inboden upset by too much attention to *The 1619 Project*, an important example of public scholarship whose mass circulation was made possible by the NYTimes. For me, it was a breakthrough moment in which important scholarship that had been going on in the university for decades was made more widely available so as to think through the foundations of the American Republic – including the contradictions in the Declaration of Independence, which offers equality for some but not all (and is an important text in many of our classrooms).

Inboden's call for a return to the classics or for a restructuring of the core curriculum fails to acknowledge the constantly shifting nature of the university curriculum. Important transformations over the last few decades have placed Toni Morrison alongside Shakespeare, Gloria Anzaldúa alongside Plato, and the slave narratives of Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs alongside Thomas Jefferson. My education and that of my students has been immeasurably enriched by a more expansive curriculum that gives voice to many writers who had previously been overlooked.

See Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (2019).

Fragmentation and Interdisciplinarity

One more talking point that is not directly from Inboden's essay but which has been circulating as a reason for consolidating departments and units in the College of Liberal Arts. The complaint is that we have too many units and that the college has become "fragmented." Those making such claims seem not to understand the history or vision of many interdisciplinary centers - which are not necessarily adding new areas but allowing for new frameworks to understand existing ones. The Center for Women's and Gender Studies, for example, has affiliates from across the campus and serves as a hub for research on gender and sexuality that takes place in multiple disciplines and colleges – creating space for us to connect with each other in order to do work that has wide-ranging social impact. We are the 21st century version of the engaged teaching and scholarship that Inboden calls for.